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## Arranging childcare in two Nordic countries: A comparison of ECEC start in Iceland and Sweden

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### Abstract

**Objective:** The study examines the age children in Iceland and Sweden start Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and how children's starting age is associated with parents' use of paid parental leave and their characteristics.

**Background:** While children in Iceland have no legal rights to ECEC following the end of paid parental leave, in Sweden there is a continuum between paid parental leave and publicly subsidised ECEC. The leave period is also shorter in Iceland than in Sweden. The article addresses how these policy differences reflect the transition from paid parental leave to ECEC-start in the two countries.

**Method:** The study uses survey data, collected among parents in Iceland and Sweden.

**Results:** Children in Iceland have an earlier ECEC start than children in Sweden. This earlier start, however, has to do with the number of children being placed in family day care while waiting for a place in the public run preschools. Mothers in Iceland stretch the parental leave for a longer period than mothers in Sweden do, and in Iceland, there were variations in ECEC start depending on mothers' labour force participation before childbirth and marital status, but not in Sweden.

**Conclusion:** The lack of preschool at the end of paid parental leave creates challenges for a certain group of parents in Iceland, a situation parents in Sweden do not have to face.

**Key words:** childcare, parental leave, Iceland, Sweden, care gap



## 1. Introduction

Iceland and Sweden are two Nordic countries that have come far in adopting the so-called ‘dual-earner/dual-carer’ model, which envisions a social and economic arrangement in which both men and women are active in the labour market and in caregiving (Eydal & Rostgaard, 2011). Comprehensive childcare policies, involving generous paid parental leave schemes for both parents and early childhood education and care (ECEC)<sup>1</sup> has contributed to the development of this model in the Nordic countries (see for example Ellingsæter & Leira, 2006; Eydal et al., 2018). Both countries are among the top 10 OECD countries having the highest coverage of ECEC for three to five-year-old children (97.4% in Iceland and 95.9% in Sweden) (OECD, 2022b) which contributes to the high labour market participation of women in both countries (83.2% in Iceland and 76.5% in Sweden) (OECD, 2022c). The gender gap in labour market participation is also among the lowest in Europe (5 percentage points in Iceland and 3 percentage points in Sweden, compared to a 10.5 EU average) (Eurostat, 2022).

The adoption of the ‘dual-earner/dual-carer’ model in Iceland and Sweden is also reflected in values on gender equality and trust in ECEC. Only 13% of Icelandic respondents and 15% of Swedish respondents in the 2012 ISSP survey agreed that a child was likely to suffer if its mother worked outside the home, a view held by 44% on average, in the 44 participating countries. The emphasis on institutional care is reflected in how the majority in Iceland (77%) and Sweden (83%) felt that government agencies should be the main provider of care for under school-aged children, while on average the majority of respondents (60%) in the participating countries felt it should be the family (ISSP research group, 2016).

However, within the Nordic model, Iceland and Sweden have taken somewhat different paths that are not presented in national statistics. For example, Nordic statistics show that 82% of one-year-old children in Iceland and 51% of one-year-old children in Sweden were enrolled in ECEC in 2021 (Nordic statistics, 2022). Such statistics do not distinguish between the type of ECEC, i.e. whether it is provided at a childminders’ home or in a public institution, nor do they provide information on whether the age of ECEC start corresponds with the length of paid parental leave. Thereby, official statistics obscure important differences in Icelandic and Swedish policies. As it is today, Iceland provides less support for parents than Sweden, which is reflected in different entitlements to ECEC and in the shorter period of paid parental leave. Parents in Iceland have no legal rights to ECEC following the parental leave period, neither to the publicly run preschools, nor family day care, a form of ECEC used while waiting for a place in preschool. In Sweden, however, children have a guarantee for a place in publicly subsidised ECEC from the age of one and do not have to wait more than two to three months for a place after applying.

Much has been written on the gender-neutral parental leave schemes in the two countries. However, the transition of care for infants at home to out-of-home care after paid parental leave in Iceland and Sweden is hardly discussed in the literature. This study aims to start to fill this gap in knowledge by drawing attention to this important transition. First, it asks what is the starting age of ECEC in Iceland and Sweden and whether children’s starting age corresponds with the length of paid parental leave provided in the two countries? Secondly, it asks whether and how children’s starting age is associated with how parents use paid parental leave and with parents’ characteristics? Thereby, the paper will shed light on how policies interact and construct the way parents arrange care. By associating children’s ECEC start with parents’ labour force participation before childbirth, and whether being a single parent and living in a city matters for when children start ECEC, in the two countries, the paper will draw important conclusions on how variations in Nordic childcare policies shape the practices of different groups of parents. The paper will thus provide new insights into differences in policy designs in two Nordic welfare states that in the international literature are often praised for having adopted the ‘dual-earner/dual-carer’ model (see for example Ellingsæter & Leira, 2006; Eydal et al., 2018). The issue at stake is how policies create possibilities for both parents (especially mothers) to engage in paid work after childbirth.

The survey in Iceland reached parents of all first-born children in 2014 whereas the Swedish survey uses a representative sample of parents of children born in 2009. Both surveys ask parents about the age of ECEC start and type of ECEC used, and survey responses are combined with registered data on parental leave use. Therefore, the data provide the unique opportunity to investigate the association between parental leave use and ECEC start in two Nordic countries. Even though sample structure and selection are somewhat different, the analyses will show whether trends and patterns differ between the two countries. We will start by

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<sup>1</sup> ECEC refers to any regulated arrangement providing education and care until children start primary school.

discussing how childcare policies in Iceland and Sweden contribute to the ‘dual-earner/dual-carer’ model, followed by a description of the methods, and end with a discussion of the results in relation to variations in policy arrangements.

## 2. Policies enabling parents to work and care

Paid parental leave, for both parents, and the provision of affordable ECEC has been, and continues to be, important for female labour force participation and parents’ possibilities to reconcile work and family life (Nieuwenhuis et al., 2022). If paid parental leave is designed to encourage leave use of both parents, and incorporates a job-protection mechanism, it can motivate parents to share the care of their children and prevent women from having to sacrifice their career when having children (Duvander et al., 2019). Similarly, available, accessible, and affordable ECEC, of high-quality, is an important instrument to enhance mothers’ employment rates (Nieuwenhuis, et al., 2022; Olivetti & Petrongolo, 2017). Yerkes and Javornik (2018) propose that the availability of ECEC should be assessed in terms of whether the dominant mode of provision is public, or market based, as enrolment is much higher in the former type of arrangement. When measuring accessibility, they place emphasis on examining whether ECEC is guaranteed for all children or whether admission depends on parents’ employment status or other preferential criteria. Their analysis shows that a child’s right to ECEC, with a guarantee, creates parents’ capabilities to arrange childcare in the way they value.

There are great country differences in the design and provision of paid parental leave and ECEC. Comparative studies find that the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Sweden, and Norway) form a cluster, because in many aspects their family policies differ from those in other European countries (see for example Ellingsæter & Leira, 2006; Matysiak & Weziak-Białowska, 2016; Thévenon, 2011). The Nordic countries offer generous paid parental leave schemes, along with publicly subsidised ECEC, which supports the so called ‘dual-earner/dual-carer’ model, a social and economic arrangement in which men and women simultaneously participate in paid work and care (Ellingsæter & Leira, 2006; Eydal et al., 2018). Furthermore, the Nordic ECEC model is acknowledged for combining high quality care and education for children, and for creating equal opportunities for parents and children (Eydal & Rostgaard, 2011). These commonalities of the Nordic countries may however overshadow some important dissimilarities, not least regarding how they support parents’ ability to work and care. Important differences are the length of the total period of paid leave after childbirth and the reserved part for each parent, and the availability, accessibility, and affordability of ECEC for children under three. Furthermore, the extent to which gender equality represents an explicit goal of the childcare policies varies (Eydal & Rostgaard, 2011; Grönlund et al., 2017).

Given these differences, it is advantageous to look at each national case to gain understanding of how policies and practices interact. In her writings on Norwegian childcare policies, Ellingsæter (2006) argues for a multi-causal, contextual approach when studying policy development and their outcomes. She maintains that the impact of a certain childcare policy needs to be seen in relation to other family policies while at the same time considering the broader economic and social structures. Ellingsæter (2006) uses the concept of a ‘childcare regime’ when referring to the main childcare policy elements within a given national context. In the Nordic countries, the main childcare policies are paid parental leave and public ECEC. Some also provide cash for care, which is an allowance paid to parents (most often to mothers) who wish to care for their child at home, after paid parental leave. According to Ellingsæter, ‘a ‘childcare regime’ is more than the sum of single policies’ (p. 122), but rather brings attention to how policies form a system and generate a structure that shapes parents’ opportunities. The ‘childcare regime’ has implications for the division of care and paid labour, and frames whether childcare should be the responsibility of family members or institutions. Thereby it affects gender roles attached to parenthood and boundaries between paid work and care for children. Furthermore, by approaching childcare policies as a regime, contradictions between different policies are uncovered. While one policy element may for example support both parents’ possibility to engage in paid work outside the home, another may constitute a risk for mothers’ employment.

As mentioned before, paid parental leave and ECEC can be designed to enable women to combine work and motherhood and encourage gender equality in care. However, by addressing childcare policies as a ‘regime’, attention is drawn to how the effectiveness of such policies, for gender equality, depends on how they interact. Iceland and Sweden’s childcare policies provide good examples of how parents face different options, despite both being associated with the Nordic ‘dual-earner/dual-carer’ model. In both countries, an emphasis on gender equality is found in the adoption of gender-neutral parental leave schemes, with similar

parts of leave reserved for each parent, none of it based on gender. The replacement level is high (80% of previous earnings), which serves to encourage both parents' leave use. However, while ECEC in Sweden aims to enhance gender equality in paid work, this is not the official goal of the Icelandic preschools. Furthermore, the lack of continuum between paid parental leave and the availability of ECEC in Iceland requires parents to come up with solutions. The solutions are gendered, as more mothers than fathers reduce their labour force participation to take care of their child (Arnalds et al., 2021; Ingólfssdóttir & Gíslason, 2016). The Icelandic 'childcare regime' thus has contradictions. While one aim of the paid parental leave scheme is to enable both men and women to reconcile work and family-life, the care-gap between paid parental leave and public ECEC undermines these gender equality ambitions (Gíslason, 2012).

Given that 'childcare regimes' create opportunities and constraints for parents, their level of generosity is likely to have more impact on certain groups than others. The expansion of publicly subsidized ECEC increases availability and affordability and may thereby reduce the gap in usage between income groups, as high out-of-pocket costs of using out-of-home childcare restricts the choices of the less advantage (OECD, 2016; Sibley et al., 2015). Previous research from Sweden supports this assumption, as class differences in ECEC use declined during the 1980's and 1990's due to increased provision of public ECEC (Bergqvist & Nyberg, 2001). The limited supply of places in public ECEC for under-two-year-olds in Iceland may result in different choices depending on the parents in question. Thus, parents' characteristics may matter for how parents in Iceland arrange care while waiting for a place in public ECEC, a situation parents in Sweden do not face.

### 3. The development of public ECEC and paid parental leave in Iceland and Sweden

Despite Iceland's high levels of female employment, high fertility rate by European standards (1.71 in 2020) (Eurostat, 2022) and trust in institutional care for children (ISSP research group, 2016), public expenditure on families with children has been less in Iceland than in Sweden. In 2014, Iceland spent 2.7% of GDP on families and children compared to 3.1% in Sweden (Nordic statistics, 2020). In fact, up until the millennium, Iceland lagged well behind all the other Nordic countries in its public support for families with children, despite a great demand stemming from the high fertility rate and mothers' high labour marked participation (Eydal et al., 2018).

Iceland is the only Nordic country that has not enacted legislation on children's guarantee for ECEC after paid parental leave (Arnalds et al., 2013). Thus, accessibility for children under the age of two is more limited in Iceland than in the other Nordic countries. There are two forms of ECEC in Iceland. The first is so-called family day care, a solution which typically involves one self-employed person caring for five children at home, and the other is the public preschools. As the municipalities run the preschools (Act on preschools no. 90/2008), children's starting age varies between areas. According to data from Statistics Iceland (2021), 17.9% of one-year-old children living in the capital area were enrolled in preschool in 2018, compared to 21.4% of one-year-old children living outside the capital area. In most municipalities, disabled children and children who are socially or economically disadvantaged have priority. The municipalities also decide the preschool fees. The fees are not means-tested, but most municipalities offer lower fees for single parents, students, and families with more than one preschool child (SÍS, 2011). The municipalities also have a legal responsibility to ensure quality, for example to ensure that the child-staff ratio does not exceed the legal limit, which is one staff member for every eight four-to-five-year-old children, but lower for younger children (Regulation on the operation of preschools no. 225/1995). According to data from the OECD (2022a), the child-staff ratio in Icelandic preschools in 2020 was four children for every staff member providing education and care.

The first law on public ECEC in Iceland came into force in 1973. Its aim was not to ensure children's rights to receive institutional care, but instead included pedagogical aspects (Broddadóttir et al., 1997). Ever since, the main objective of the Icelandic preschools has been to educate children through play, and therefore they are named 'playschools' (leikskóli) (Eydal & Ólafsson, 2008). The emphasis on educating children is also addressed in the National curriculum guide for preschools (Ministry of education and culture, 2011), which demonstrates how preschools are constructed around the interests of children while encouraging parents' employment is not the official goal. Although nearly all two-year-old children living in Iceland attend preschool (Statistics Iceland, 2021), the expansion of preschool for younger children has been slow, which could in part be explained by the emphasis on pedagogical aspects over the objective of enhancing gender equality.

Before being offered a place in preschool in Iceland, there is an option of using family day care, provided by self-employed childminders. The municipalities regulate and subsidise family day care, but despite the subsidy, parents pay a higher fee for family day care than the public preschools. In some areas, the municipality sets a standard for the fees, while in others, childminders decide how much they charge parents for the services. In many areas the supply is less than demand. A recent survey, reaching parents using family day care in Iceland's largest municipality, Reykjavík, found that most parents would prefer that their child started preschool earlier instead of using family day care. The reasons they gave concerned the staff, which was not educated to work with young children, and safety, as children are under the supervision of only one adult (Skóla- og frístundasvið Reykjavíkurborgar, 2018).

In Sweden, the number of women in paid work started to increase in the early 1960s, which called for childcare solutions. Initially, publicly financed family day care played a substantial role in care provision but has steadily declined during the past decades with the expansion of public preschools (Duvander & Nyberg, 2023). Unlike what was the case in Iceland, initially, the stated goal for the provision of ECEC was to offer childcare to all working parents. Later the goal was also to offer part-time places for children whose parents were not working outside the home (Viklund & Duvander, 2017). A government commission report from 1972 argued that the aim of public ECEC should be to prepare children for school, integrate children with special needs and work towards the goal of achieving gender equality (SOU, 1972a, 1972b). Thus, in addition to having pedagogical purposes, one of the official goals of establishing preschools (förskola) in Sweden was to enable both parents to become active in the labour market. As is the case in Iceland, the municipalities have an obligation to inspect and evaluate the quality of the preschools. However, no specific national standards on staff-child ratios exist, but according to data from the OECD (2022a) the average ratio was six children for every qualified teacher or other staff performing educational functions, compared to the OECD average of nine children.

Since 1995, parents have a legal right to publicly subsidised ECEC from the age of one and should not have to wait more than two to three months for a place after applying. In practice the municipalities achieved this goal from around 2000 and onwards. Yet another difference between the Icelandic and Swedish preschool systems are the fees, which in Iceland vary between municipalities, while Sweden introduced equal fees in 2001. According to Swedish law, the monthly fee shall correspond to a certain percentage of the household income and not exceed a ceiling. The fee also decreases by number of children in the household; for the first child the fee cannot exceed 3% of the household income, for the second child it cannot exceed 2% and for the third child it cannot exceed 1% while the fourth child is free (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2020).

Iceland's and Sweden's paid parental leave schemes also reflect the difference in public support for families in the two countries. Iceland was the last Nordic country to offer universal entitlements to paid parental leave. The first legislation on universal rights to all mothers is from 1981, which granted mothers three months of paid leave that were gradually extended to six months. The current legislation is from 2000. Its aim is to ensure children care from both parents and enable both men and women to co-ordinate family life and work outside the home. Up until 2020, each parent was entitled to three months of non-transferable leave (a fathers' and mothers' quota) and additional three months they could divide as they chose. The leave was extremely generous in terms of paternal rights, but the total leave period was criticized for being too short (Eydal & Gíslason, 2008). However, the extension of the leave did not occur until 2020, when the quota for each parent became four months and the shared period reduced to two months, to be used within two years after childbirth. In January 2021 the total leave period was lengthened to 12 months, with six months assigned to each parent, although each parent can transfer six weeks to the other parent. Thus, up until 2020, the total leave period was nine months, which is much shorter than in the other Nordic countries. Parents receive 80% of their previous earnings while on leave (with a ceiling), and a flat-rate benefit is paid to those who have not earned rights to earnings-related benefits by participation in the labour market. Parents can take leave simultaneously if they wish, and they can stretch the leave for up to two years by using it part-time, with or without working on the side, a common practice among mothers but hardly ever used by fathers (Arnalds et al., 2021). If parents wish to stretch the leave, their employer must agree with the arrangement. All parents have the right to return to their job after paid parental leave.

Similar to what is the case for Iceland, the Swedish parental leave scheme aims at facilitating the combination of work and care for children. The earnings-related scheme was first introduced in 1974. It provided parents with six months of paid leave, which they could share as they preferred. Since then, the leave has been extended in steps and currently parents are entitled to 16 months of paid leave, with the first 13 months being earnings-related, that can be used within 12 years after childbirth. With the goal of increasing

the take-up rate of fathers, a one-month father's and mother's quota was introduced in 1995. At the same time, the leave that parents could divide between them became individual, which meant that the parent wanting to use more than half of the leave needed the other parent's consent. The father's and mother's quotas were extended to two months in 2002 (Duvander & Johansson, 2012), and in 2016 a third month was added. Contrary to the Icelandic scheme, parents in Sweden cannot use their quota simultaneously, but since 2012, they can use up to one month of the shared period together (Eydal et al., 2015). However, the Swedish system is flexible in that the leave can be 'stretched out' if economy allows, which gives the opportunity to postpone preschool start (Duvander & Viklund, 2014; Viklund & Duvander, 2017). Table 1 provides a summary of the parental leave entitlements in Iceland and Sweden and how they have changed over the years.

*Table 1: Paid parental leave in Iceland and Sweden, since the introduction of a father's quota*

	Mother	Father	Joint rights	Transferable rights
<b>Iceland</b>				
Policies in 2000	3 months	3 months	3 months	
Changes in 2020	4 months	4 months	2 months	
Changes in 2021	6 months	6 months		1.5 months each parent
<b>Sweden</b>				
Policies in 1995	1 month	1 month	13 months	
Changes in 2002	2 months	2 months	12 months	
Changes in 2016	3 months	3 months	10 months	

*Note/Source:* Act on maternity/paternity and parental leave (95/2000); Duvander et al. (2019); Duvander & Johansson (2012)

In sum, despite the large volume of children attending ECEC in Iceland and Sweden and both countries' emphasis on gender equal leave schemes, there are great differences between the Icelandic and the Swedish 'childcare regimes'. By placing emphasis on when children start ECEC in the two countries, and the discrepancy between ECEC start and parental leave entitlements, the study seeks to gain deeper understanding of the interplay between different policy elements. The study also addresses the association between parents' characteristics and ECEC start, to learn whether there are differences in the way parents use the policies depending on their labour market status, marital status, residency, and age. Thereby, the study will draw important conclusions on parents' possibilities to combine work and care in two Nordic 'dual-earner/dual-carer countries'.

## 4. Methods

### 4.1 Data

The data stem from two surveys. The Icelandic survey was carried out in 2018 among parents of four-year-old children. A letter, containing a web address to an online survey, was sent to the home address of the entire population of children born in 2014, who were their mothers' firstborn. Only 4375 children were born in Iceland in 2014. Out of these, 1666 were their mothers' firstborn, which was the target population. There were 944 responses, resulting in a 57% response rate. It was left to the parents to decide which of them completed the survey or if they answered together. The mother completed the survey in 71% of cases, 15% answered together, and the father completed the survey in 14% of cases.

The Swedish survey, *Tid och pengar*, was conducted in 2012 by the Swedish Social Insurance Agency. A random sample of 4000 parents of children born in 2004 and 2009 (2000 from each cohort) were contacted by an introductory letter and then called and asked to participate in a telephone survey. In two-parent households, either parent could participate, and respondents answered questions that both referred to themselves and their partner. The response rate was 43%. Data were weighted to adjust for the effects of non-response (Forsäkringskassan, 2013).

Both surveys contained questions on parental leave use, childcare and employment, and in both cases the data were combined with register data on parents' leave use. In Iceland, parents who live abroad at the time of childbirth are not entitled to paid parental leave. These parents were excluded from the analysis. The 2004

cohort was also excluded from the Swedish data to match the time of the surveys to the largest extent possible. The analysis is therefore based on 863 cases in Iceland and 1184 cases in Sweden. It is however important to note that comparing data from two different surveys has some limitations. The Icelandic dataset concerned firstborn children, while the Swedish respondents may have older children. Furthermore, the Icelandic survey was a web-survey while telephone interviews were used in the Swedish survey. Therefore, mode effect is a possible limitation.

## 4.2 Measures and analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to compare ECEC start and parental leave use between the two countries. When measuring when children start institutional care, for Iceland a distinction is made between the time they enter preschools and the time they enter ECEC, which can both involve preschools and family day care. Linear regression models were used to analyse how parental leave use, parents' labour market status before childbirth, whether they lived in a city, and parents' marital status is associated with ECEC start. As a distinction is made between entering preschools and entering ECEC (either preschool or family day care), there are two dependent variables for the Icelandic sample. These are *child's age in months when entering preschool* and *child's age in months when entering ECEC*. Only the latter dependent variable is used for the Swedish sample as family day care is hardly used in Sweden.

The models use thirteen independent variables. First, there are variables measuring parents' leave use, as the way parents use the leave may demonstrate the policy differences between the two countries. There is a variable for the *length of mothers' parental leave, in months*, either part-time or full-time, without working on the side, and a dummy variable for whether the *mother used part-time leave alongside work or studies*. For Iceland, these variables were computed based on responses to questions on the mothers' status (working, studying or on paid parental leave) each month from the time the child was born until it reached the age of two. For Sweden, these variables are based on responses to questions on the length of full-time parental leave during the first two years and whether the mother was at any period working or studying part-time while on paid parental leave. *Father's share of paid parental leave* is based on registered data, that were combined with the survey data, and was for both countries computed by dividing the father's total number of leave days by the total number of leave days paid to the family during the first two years.

There are also variables for parents' labour market status before childbirth, as these may indicate parents' resources and labour market attachment. There are two dummy variables for *mother's labour market status before childbirth* i.e. for mothers working part-time and other mothers (students and non-working mothers) with mothers working full-time serving as a reference category. As very few fathers worked part-time, there is only one dummy variable for *father's labour market status before childbirth*, representing both non-working fathers and fathers in part-time work. There are also dummy variables for whether the father and mother received an extra *grant from the employer* during the leave. Such grants cover most of the income loss over the ceiling and has become increasingly common.

The urban-rural divide is based on postal codes. There is a dummy variable for cities (Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö in Sweden and Iceland's only city, Reykjavík) and a dummy variable for suburbs of these cities, with other areas serving as a reference category. As the municipalities in Iceland are responsible for preschool provision, these variables may indicate whether the availability of ECEC varies according to location. Their significance may also reflect urban-rural differences in gender role attitudes, as have been found to exist in Slovenia, where rural residents have been found to have more conservative attitudes (Istanič, 2007). There is also a dummy variable for single parents, with the reference category of married or cohabiting parents. In Iceland we would expect children of single parents to have an earlier ECEC start than children of married or cohabiting parents, as the single breadwinner role could prevent them from stretching the leave period with a reduction in parental leave payments. However, the continuum between paid parental leave and ECEC in Sweden may result in less differences between single parents and married or cohabiting parents. Finally, as research has shown that younger generations are stronger supporters of a more egalitarian division between mothers and fathers in the care for children (Valentova, 2013), we control for *fathers' and mothers' age*. Table 2 provides descriptive statistics for the variables used in the analysis.



Table 2: Descriptive statistics for the Icelandic and Swedish sample

	Icelandic parents			Swedish parents		
	N	Range	Mean/% (SD)	N	Range	Mean/% (SD)
<b>Dependent variables</b>						
<i>Child's age when starting preschool</i>	795	6-36	18.99 (5.37)			
<i>Child's age when starting ECEC</i>	798	2-36	13.43 (4.92)	1116	6-42	17.56 (4.49)
<b>Independent variables</b>						
<i>Number of months the mother is on leave</i>	803	1-24	8.35 (3.09)	1146	0-30	13.02 (4.95)
<i>Mother took part-time leave with work</i>						
Used leave part-time with work	51	-	6.4%	286	-	24.1%
Did not use leave part-time with work	752	-	93.6%	902	-	75.9%
<i>Father's share of paid parental leave</i>	863	0-0.67	0.28 (0.15)	848	0-1	0.26 (0.18)
<i>Mother's labour market status before childb.</i>						
Working full-time	492	-	65.4%	755	-	64.6%
Working part-time	52	-	6.9%	218	-	18.7%
Other	208	-	27.7%	195	-	16.7%
<i>Father's labour market status before childb.</i>						
Working full-time	551	-	81.5%	817	-	91.5%
Other	125	-	18.5%	76	-	8.5%
<i>Mothers receiving a grant from employer</i>						
Did receive	30	-	3.5%	331	-	28.3%
Did not receive	827	-	96.5%	837	-	71.7%
<i>Fathers receiving a grant from employer</i>						
Did receive	30	-	3.6%	320	-	35.8%
Did not receive	814	-	96.4%	573	-	64.2%
<i>Parent's residency</i>						
Other areas	233		27.0%	694	-	58.4%
City	314	-	36.4%	206	-	17.3%
Suburb of a city	316	-	36.6%	288	-	24.2%
<i>Marital status of parent(s) in household</i>						
Married/cohabiting	769	-	89.1%	1123	-	94.5%
Single	94	-	10.9%	65	-	5.5%
<i>Mother's age</i>	863	21-52	31.22 (4.77)	1184	17-50	31.33 (4.87)
<i>Father's age</i>	787	22-70	33.99 (5.72)	1184	19-58	33.59 (5.55)

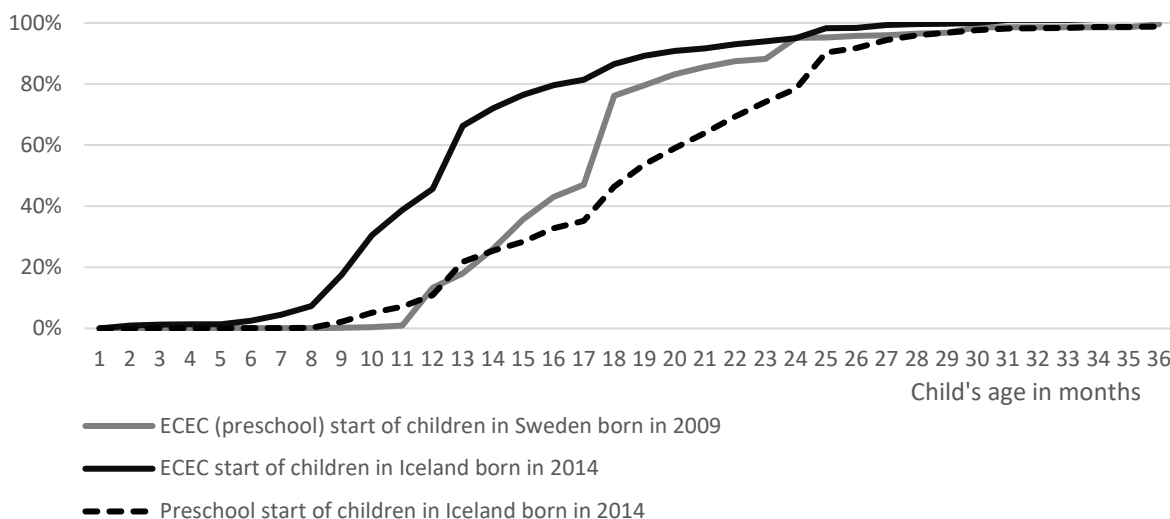
## 5. Results

### 5.1 ECEC start in Iceland and Sweden

In Iceland, the average age for starting preschool was 19 months (95% CI [18.63, 19.37]) whereas the average age for starting ECEC (i.e. family day care or preschool) was 13.5 months (95% CI [13.09, 13.77]). The average age of ECEC start in Sweden was 17.6 months (95% CI [17.33, 17.86]) (Table 2). Since the confidence intervals for Iceland and Sweden do not overlap, the difference in ECEC start between the two countries is statistically significant. Children in Iceland started ECEC earlier than children in Sweden did (Figure 1). This earlier start, however, had to do with the large number of children (55%) in family day care, contrary to what was the case in Sweden, where ECEC start is characterised by starting preschool. When comparing preschool start in the two countries, the results show that Icelandic children start preschool later than children in Sweden. During the time of data collection, the paid parental leave in Iceland was only nine months, and therefore these results showcase a huge gap between parental leave and preschool start in Iceland. As already noted, family day care in Iceland is more expensive than preschools but also more available for children under the age of

two. Furthermore, childminders in family day care decide on their own what kind of service they want to provide, whereas there is a national curriculum guide for preschools.

Figure 1: Age of ECEC start in Iceland and Sweden – Cumulative percentages



Interestingly, in both countries, there is a discrepancy between the parental leave entitlements, and the average age children start ECEC. In Sweden, it is common for children to start ECEC between the age of 17 and 18 months, despite the total leave being 16 months, and despite having a guaranteed place from the age of one. In Iceland, the total leave period was nine months, and the average age for starting ECEC was between the age of 13 and 14 months. At the end of paid parental leave, nine months after childbirth, only 18% of children in Iceland had started ECEC and only 2% had started preschool. In comparison, 22% of children in Sweden had started ECEC at the age of 13 months, at the end of the earnings-related parental leave, and 43% had started ECEC at the age of 16 months, which is the length of the total parental leave period (Figure 1). Thus, there was a huge difference in the length of the Icelandic parental leave period and the age for starting ECEC.

The discrepancy between the leave length and ECEC start in Iceland raises a question of how parents arranged care in this period. Mothers in Iceland could use six months of leave (if they used their three-month quota and the three sharable months) while mothers in Sweden had the possibility of using 13 months. Table 2 shows that mothers in Iceland used 8.4 months on average (95% CI [8.13, 8.56]), while mothers in Sweden used 13 months on average (95% CI [12.73, 13.31]). This shows that in Iceland it is more common for mothers to extend the leave by using it part-time without working on the side. The number of months mothers in Iceland were on leave, ranged from one to 24 months, showing that some extended the leave for up to two years. In fact, the results revealed that 65.8% of the mothers in Iceland had used at least some of the leave part-time without work. As seen in Table 2, only 6.4% of mothers had done part-time work or studies while on leave, which means that a large share received part-time benefits without supplementing the benefits with salaries. However, in Sweden it was more common for mothers to use part-time leave with work, indicating that they used some leave to work shorter days, but did not extend the time at home with the child to the same degree as mothers in Iceland did.

## 5.2 Factors associated with ECEC start in Iceland and Sweden

The regression analysis revealed that in Iceland preschool start was neither associated with mothers' leave use nor their labour market status before childbirth. This came as no surprise, as parents have little control over when their children can start preschool. Still, children of single parents had an earlier preschool start than children of married or cohabiting parents, indicating that single parents have priority. The area of residence was also associated with preschool start, emphasising how the provision of preschools differs between municipalities. Those that lived in the suburbs of Reykjavík started preschool later than those living

outside the capital area, while there was not a significant difference between those living in Reykjavík and those living outside the capital area (Table 3).

Table 3: OLS regression predicting ECEC start in Iceland

Independent variables	Preschool		ECEC (either family day care or preschool)		
	<i>b</i>	<i>robust SE</i>	<i>b</i>		<i>robust SE</i>
Number of months the mother is on leave	0.069	0.082	0.194	**	0.077
Mother used part-time leave with work (not = 0)					
Part-time leave with work	-0.074	0.848	-0.145		0.607
Father's share of paid parental leave	-2.360	1.711	1.449		1.660
Mother's labour market status b. childb. (full-t. = 0)					
Working part-time	1.350	0.860	2.908	**	0.955
Other	-0.013	0.576	0.838		0.525
Father's labour market status b. childb. (full-t. = 0)					
Other	-0.799	0.609	-0.644		0.513
Mothers receiving a grant from employer (not = 0)	-1.772	1.090	-1.385		0.913
Fathers receiving a grant from employer (not = 0)	1.486	1.184	2.393	†	1.340
Parent's residency (rural = 0)					
City	0.197	0.606	-0.440		0.525
Suburb of a city	1.412	* 0.571	-0.120		0.535
Parent(s) in household (married/cohabiting = 0)					
Single	-1.390	* 0.706	-1.339	*	0.650
Mother's age	-0.040	0.074	-0.056		0.062
Father's age	0.053	0.064	0.078		0.060
Constant	18.159	*** 1.928	10.594	***	1.888
N	584		586		
R <sup>2</sup>	0.043		0.062		

† $p < 0.10$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

Interestingly, when the dependent variable is ECEC start (i.e. either family day care or preschools), the findings show more differences between groups of parents in Iceland. Table 3 presents the results of a regression analysis predicting ECEC start in Iceland and Table 4 shows the results for Sweden. In both countries the way parents used the parental leave scheme was associated with ECEC start. The longer the mother was on leave without working on the side, the later the child started ECEC, indicating that mothers in Iceland and Sweden delay the start by using the flexibility of the parental leave system. In Sweden, using the leave part-time with work or studies was associated with a later ECEC start but not in Iceland. Furthermore, fathers' share of parental leave was positively associated with later ECEC start in Sweden but not in Iceland, which could be explained by differences in policies, as Icelandic parents are allowed to use their quota months simultaneously, but not parents in Sweden.

Given that children in Iceland are not secured a place in ECEC after paid parental leave, it was expected that parents' situation before childbirth influenced ECEC start in different ways in Iceland than in Sweden. The results support this assumption as parents' labour market status before childbirth was associated with ECEC start in Iceland but not in Sweden. Children in Iceland whose mothers worked full-time before childbirth started ECEC earlier than those who worked part-time. The comparison between Iceland and Sweden also revealed that being a single parent was associated with earlier ECEC start in Iceland, while this association was not significant in the model for Sweden. Finally, mothers' age was significantly associated with ECEC start in Sweden but not in Iceland.

Table 4: OLS regression predicting ECEC start in Sweden

Independent variables	ECEC		
	<i>b</i>		<i>robust SE</i>
Number of months the mother is on leave	0.568	***	0.035
Mother used part-time leave with work (not = 0)			
Part-time leave with work	0.941	**	0.306
Father's share of paid parental leave	9.274	***	0.943
Mother's labour market status b. childb. (full-time = 0)			
Working part-time	-0.149		0.352
Other	-0.325		0.366
Father's labour market status b. childb. (full-time = 0)			
Other	-0.089		0.447
Mothers receiving a grant from employer (not = 0)	-0.289		0.298
Fathers receiving a grant from employer (not = 0)	0.267		0.284
Parent's residency (rural = 0)			
City	-0.658	†	0.352
Suburb of a city	0.188		0.319
Parent(s) in household (married/cohabiting = 0)			
Single	-0.518		0.627
Mother's age	0.061	†	0.037
Father's age	0.033		0.030
Constant	5.041	***	1.115
N	804		
R <sup>2</sup>	0.259		

† $p < 0.10$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

## 6. Discussion

The aim of this article was to contribute to research on how policy differences play out in how parents arrange care for their young children by comparing two Nordic 'dual-earner-dual carer' societies, Iceland and Sweden. Ellingsæter's (2006) multi-causal, contextual approach was applied when discussing how the interplay between childcare policies in the two countries frames parents' practices. This was done by examining whether the age of starting ECEC depends on how parents can use the parental leave policies, and parents' characteristics. Analysis of survey data, collected among parents, revealed that children in Iceland start ECEC earlier (at 13.4 months) than children in Sweden (at 17.6 months). This earlier start, however, has to do with the number of parents using family day care while waiting for a place in the public preschools, which on average takes place at the age of 19 months. Thus, the results show that children in Iceland start preschool later than children in Sweden, even though the parental leave in Iceland was much shorter than in Sweden, during the time of data collection for this study. These results showcase a large care-gap in Iceland, between the paid parental leave and the form of ECEC that is comparable with the one offered in Sweden. Family day care is often the first form of ECEC for children in Iceland. The Nordic ECEC model is acknowledged for creating equal opportunities for parents and children, and for combining care and educational stimulation for all children (Eydal & Rostgaard, 2011). However, the high out-of-pocket costs and lack of availability of family day care in Iceland raises the question of whether this form of ECEC conforms to the Nordic ECEC model of equal opportunities.

The article sought to provide understanding of how ECEC-start is associated with parents' use of another childcare policy, paid parental leave. Thereby, we address the interconnection between policies within these 'childcare regimes', a concept Ellingsæter (2006) uses to describe the main childcare policies within a given national context, and how they shape parents' opportunities. In both countries, patterns of leave use were important. The possibility to 'stretch' the leave by using it part-time was used by mothers in both countries, and the longer the mother was on leave without working on the side, the later their child started ECEC. However, in Iceland the discrepancy between the extended leave period and mothers' parental leave entitlement was larger than in Sweden. In Iceland, mothers could at the most use six months of leave, if it was used full-time, while the results showed that mothers used 8.4 months on average. Stretching the leave

may be a necessity for mothers who do not have access to family day care, but it could also be that parents do not want to place the child in out-of-home care at such a young age. Breastfeeding could also play an important role in mothers' decisions, as breastfeeding rates in the Nordic countries are among the highest in the world and breastfeeding represents a strong moral and social norm (Símonardóttir & Gíslason, 2018). When stretching the leave, mothers receive lower parental leave payments than they would if the leave was used full-time. Mothers in Sweden also stretched the leave, but to a lesser extent than mothers in Iceland, and those who used the leave part-time were more likely to do so while working on the side than mothers in Iceland did. It may be that Swedish mothers stretch their leave days to 'save' some leave for later needs during the preschool years. The analysis also revealed the interesting finding that fathers' larger share of leave led to a later ECEC start in Sweden but not in Iceland. A plausible explanation is that a share of fathers in Iceland used their quota while the mother was also on leave, an option fathers in Sweden do not have.

Another aim was to address how ECEC start within the two 'childcare regimes' is associated with parents' characteristics. The Icelandic regime is less generous when it comes to the length of paid parental leave and securing children a place in preschool which could lead to more variations in the way the policies are used in Iceland than in Sweden. The results confirmed this speculation, as mothers' labour force participation before childbirth was an important factor determining children's ECEC start in Iceland but not in Sweden. In Iceland, mothers who worked part-time before childbirth started ECEC later than those working full-time. Unfortunately, the surveys did not contain questions on parents' preferences, but a plausible explanation is that mothers doing part-time work may have found it difficult to pay for family day care, or that work demands prevented full-time workers from extending the time at home. Furthermore, in Iceland, children of single parents had an earlier ECEC start than children of married or cohabiting parents. While this could indicate that children of single parents have priority in starting preschool, it also may demonstrate how stretching the leave by using it part-time may not be an option for mothers who serve as a single breadwinner. Thus, these results show that the Icelandic 'childcare regime' restricts the choices of certain groups of parents to a larger extent than what is found in Sweden.

Finally, in Sweden, children living in cities had an earlier start than children did in rural areas, whereas in Iceland, children living in the suburbs of the city had a later preschool start than those living in rural areas. It is unclear whether the difference in preschool start between areas is caused by difference in provision or different attitudes towards institutional care, depending on the place of residence. However, given the fact that municipalities are responsible for preschool provision in Iceland, while Swedish law states that all children are entitled to preschool after paid parental leave, it is likely that provision plays a larger part in preschool start in Iceland than in Sweden.

In conclusion, the differences in policies between the two countries, that have a similar general underlying logic of encouraging gender equality and facilitating the combination of work and care, lead to different childcare arrangements and thereby different possibilities for mothers to engage in paid work after childbirth. Even when norms and societal factors are similar, the 'childcare regime's' level of generosity is important when considering the opportunities of parents. The lack of coherence between paid parental leave and public ECEC, two important parts of the 'childcare regime', has led to a care-gap in Iceland, which parents must find a way to bridge. In Iceland, some parents bridge the gap by using family day care, that has higher fees than the public preschools and is not available in all areas. The gap is also bridged by using the flexibility of the parental leave scheme by using the leave part-time without working on the side, which may however not always be a possibility, for example if the mother serves as the single breadwinner. The results therefore speak for the importance of policies that ensure a continuum between paid parental leave and a form of public ECEC that creates equal opportunities for parents and children, regardless of income and marital status.

## 7. Conclusion and future research

The study set out to examine the interplay between two important childcare policies, paid parental leave and ECEC. The design of paid parental leave and the provision of publicly subsidised ECEC are two features of a 'childcare regime' that have the potential to promote female labour force participation and diminish the gender gap in parental care for children. When evaluating the effectiveness of these policies, it is important to gain insight to how different groups of parents use paid parental leave and ECEC within a given national context, and to compare usage across contexts, as such analysis can provide valuable information on the choices available to parents. Previous research on the availability and effectiveness of ECEC are highly context-

specific, as pointed out in a literature review by Nieuwenhuis et al. (2022). Moreover, there is a lack of studies on the interplay between different childcare policy elements, particularly from a user perspective. Therefore, the study presented in this article, can make a valuable contribution to the field of family policy research.

As pointed out by Yerkes and Javornik (2018), policies that guarantee a place in ECEC for all children, without gaps between paid parental leave and ECEC, improve parents' capabilities to arrange childcare in the way they value. Using this definition, Icelandic ECEC is in many ways inaccessible, as children have no legal right to the public, high-quality, preschools, although almost all children are enrolled by the age of two. For many, there is a one-year gap from the end of parental leave until children are offered a place in preschool, which means that parents are faced with the option of using family day care, a highly inaccessible form of ECEC. From a user perspective, the study shows that a lack of accessible and affordable ECEC in Iceland impacts the way parents use paid parental leave and creates differences in children's ECEC start between groups of parents. The variation in children's starting age is the result of some parents using the ECEC form of family day care, while others wait until their child is offered a place in the public preschools, which varies between municipalities. Contrastingly, in Sweden, where all children have a right to a place in publicly subsidised ECEC at the end of paid parental leave, there are less differences in ECEC start between groups of parents. Interestingly however, in Sweden mothers also stretched the parental leave period, despite being guaranteed a place in ECEC at the end of paid parental leave. This may indicate that parents value care at home for a longer period than the parental leave scheme entails. However, the length of the stretched leave is less in Sweden than in Iceland, which further indicates that a gap between paid parental leave and accessible and affordable ECEC impacts mothers' use of paid parental leave.

Although the study results provide important insight into the interplay between parental leave use and ECEC start, the analysis has also brought to light several limitations and research gaps. Firstly, the data are quite dated, and there is a severe need for more recent comparable survey data on how parents use parental leave and ECEC in Iceland and Sweden, as well as in the other Nordic countries. Icelandic policies, for example, have undergone changes since the collection of data. In 2021, the parental leave was lengthened to 12 months. In the campaign for the municipal elections in 2022, the largest municipalities in Iceland had on their agenda to close the care gap by providing access to preschool from the age of 12 months. At the time, many family day carers closed their business, as demand was suspected to drop with the rising provision of preschools. However, at least in Iceland's largest municipality, Reykjavík, the politicians were not able to live up to their campaign promise due to lack of preschool staff. This led to parental protest in the city hall (see for example RUV, 2023, March 15) and qualified preschool teachers raised concern over the hiring of unqualified staff, which was thought to lower the quality of preschools (Björnsdóttir & Jóhannsdóttir, 2023, May 23). Given this tension, it is important to collect new data on how parents arrange care for the youngest children.

Secondly, the study is first and foremost focused on the accessibility and affordability of ECEC, and how it relates to parental leave use and parents' characteristics. The study highly ignores the aspect of how parents value the quality of care provided at ECEC institutions. From the theoretical standpoint of the 'care regime' all aspects of childcare policies should be considered when drawing conclusions on how childcare policies shape parents' opportunities. This means that surveys need to incorporate questions on how parents value parental and out-of-home care, as well as questions on the use of paid parental leave and different types of ECEC. Parents are likely to make decisions based on availability, accessibility, and quality (Nieuwenhuis et al., 2022). The historical development of ECEC has taught us that when public ECEC is guaranteed, most children are enrolled, and home-based types of ECEC become out-dated (Duvander & Nyberg, 2023). However, at least in the Nordic context, it is unclear whether children's preschool starting age varies depending on how parents value the quality of care for the youngest children. We therefore conclude that perceptions of care quality need to be seriously studied to draw conclusions on parents' care arrangements and their outcomes for the gendered division of work and care.

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Authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## Data availability statement

The datasets analysed for the study are not publicly available. Data are only available on request for analysis locally at the University of Iceland and Stockholm University, but ethical regulations will limit access to parts of the data. Replication codes to this article are available from the webpage of the article.

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# Information in German

## Deutscher Titel

Die Organisation der Kinderbetreuung in zwei nordischen Ländern: Ein Vergleich des Einstiegsalters in „ECEC“ in Island und Schweden

## Zusammenfassung

**Fragestellung:** Die Studie untersucht das Alter, in dem Kinder in Island und Schweden mit der frühkindlichen Betreuung, Bildung und Erziehung („ECEC“) beginnen, und wie das Eintrittsalter der Kinder mit der Inanspruchnahme von Elternzeit und den Merkmalen der Eltern zusammenhängt.

**Hintergrund:** Während Kinder in Island nach dem Ende der bezahlten Elternzeit keinen Rechtsanspruch auf ECEC haben, gibt es in Schweden mehrere Möglichkeiten zwischen bezahltem Elternurlaub und öffentlich subventionierter ECEC. Die Dauer der Elternzeit ist in Island kürzer als in Schweden. Der Artikel untersucht, wie sich diese Unterschiede beim Übergang von bezahlter Elternzeit in die frühkindliche Bildung in den beiden Ländern widerspiegeln.

**Methode:** Die Studie basiert auf Umfragedaten isländischer und schwedischer Eltern.

**Ergebnisse:** Kinder in Island beginnen früher mit ECEC als Kinder in Schweden. Dieser frühere Beginn hängt damit zusammen, dass viele Kinder in Kindertagesstätten untergebracht werden, während sie auf einen Platz in den öffentlichen Kindergärten warten. Mütter in Island ziehen ihre Elternzeit über einen längeren Zeitraum als Mütter in Schweden, und in Island, aber nicht in Schweden, zeigen sich Unterschiede beim Einstiegsalter in ECEC nach der Erwerbsbeteiligung der Mutter vor der Geburt der Kinder und den Familienstand.

**Schlussfolgerung:** Das Fehlen von Kinderbetreuung am Ende der bezahlten Elternzeit ist für bestimmte isländische Eltern eine Herausforderung, mit der sich Eltern in Schweden nicht auseinandersetzen müssen.

**Schlagwörter:** Kinderbetreuung, Elternzeit, Island, Schweden, Betreuungslücke

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